

Iran Fears Full-Scale Regional War

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 16.12.2023

Since the outbreak of “Swords of Iron,” top officials in Teheran, most notably Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have denied Iran’s involvement in planning the October 7 massacre as well as Houthi aggressions in the Red Sea. These proclamations are meant to distance Iran from the attacks made by its strategic partners. At the same time, they reveal Iran’s fear of open, full-scale war and Tehran’s preference to keep its regional meddling and muckraking behind the scenes.

This Iranian fear, and preference for proxy war only, stem from a combination of considerations relating to Tehran’s domestic and international standing.

First, as a matter of principal, Iran’s tends to avoid direct engagement in regional or global conflicts. Iran instead flexes its power by supporting a wide range of proxy forces that launch terror attacks against its enemies, mainly the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has conducted numerous extraterritorial operations without having to mobilize its own troops. Instead, it employs terror clients in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip. This strategy has driven Iran to several strategic achievements such as US withdrawal from Lebanon in the 1980s and the retribution exacted on Saudi Arabia in 2019 for its prime role in promoting the American oil sanctions imposed on Iran (following President Trump’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal).

Second, deeply ingrained in the Iranian consciousness is the Iran-Iraq War. This war is viewed by leadership as a momentous event that demonstrated significant national sacrifice. The war cost Iran heavily in casualties (at least 220,000 dead) and trillions of dollars worth of damage to critical infrastructure. Considering this high toll on human life and strategically vital assets, Iran has since refrained from engaging in additional frontal wars. Its leaders repeatedly boast that, despite the various upheavals afflicting the region, the country has remained an “island of stability.”

Third, the Iranian regime has been dealing with a prolonged crisis of legitimacy, as evidenced by the historic low voter turnout in the 2020 parliamentary elections (42%) and by the Amini protests (September 2022-March 2023). With declining

levels of public support, the Iranian regime cannot afford to embark on a military adventure which would risk its very survival.

Fourth, Iran is restricted by its military and technological capabilities, which undeniably are inferior to those of its American rival. This is most probably why Tehran had settled for a limited offensive against Washington in retaliation for the January 2020 assassination of former Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani.

This stance was expressed by the IRGC's aerospace commander, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, one of the most hawkish figures in the Iranian security apparatus, who admitted that Tehran didn't want to engage in a direct war with the US. Another testimony reflecting this sentiment can be found in the words of Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel, Ayatollah Khamenei's advisor and son-in-law. In a recent interview, Adel explained that Iran's initiating a military offense against Israel would serve an Israeli plot to cause a clash between Iran and the US.

The combination of these factors help explain Iran's decision not to directly enter a full-scale war fray. After all, Iran's proxy warfare strategy has proved effective enough. In the Iraq War (2003-2011), Iran fought against American and British forces indirectly through the Shi'ite terrorist apparatus it had nurtured (Jaysh al-Mahdi, Liwa' al-Yawm al-Maw'oud, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq), alongside Sunni Islamist groups (Al-Qaeda Iraq and Ansar al-Islam) that received its backing. This also was the case during the Second Lebanon War, in which Iran played an important role in supporting Hezbollah's warfare against Israel.

Iran also credits itself with the achievements obtained by the resistance terror organizations in their rounds of fighting against Israel. In February 2012, Khamenei proudly stated that Iran "was involved in the resistance campaign against Israel, and the result was manifested in the victory (Hezbollah's) in the 33-Day War (the 2006 war), as well as in the (Hamas') victory in the 22-Day War (Operation Cast Lead, December 2008-January 2009). Ever since, we have stood behind every nation and every organization fighting against the Zionist regime, everywhere, and we have no fear of saying so. That is the simple truth."

Khamenei is known for his ideological teachings calling for the destruction of Israel by force. However, in stark contrast to this position, he recently stated that Iran does not wish to "throw either the Jews or the Zionists into the sea," blatantly lying about such past statements. (For example, in February 2020 IRGC

Commander Salami urged Israelis to “take a good look at the Mediterranean, because that will be your [their] final dwelling.”)

During “Swords of Iron,” Khamenei and other senior Iranian officials have denied any role in the attacks against Israel in Gaza or from Yemen. It also denies responsibility for Iraqi Shi’ite militia attacks on American targets in Iraq and Syria.

In any case, it is plainly obvious that Tehran supports the elimination of Israel through proxy warfare. The massacres perpetrated by Hamas on October 7 are a direct result of Iran’s significant, decade-long support of the terror organization. Hamas’ murderous ideology is also compatible with Khamenei’s antisemitic teachings and anti-Jewish hatred, which seems to have permeated all branches of the Iranian regime. Religious rulings issued by Khomeini and Khamenei permit the killing, including by suicide attacks, of all Jewish citizens of Israel on the pretext that they are the “Occupiers of Palestine.”

Not only does Iran not hide its desire to destroy Israel, but it also says so openly on every possible platform. On Khamenei’s order, Iranian athletes boycott Israel at international competitions, making sure not to grant Israel even a shred of legitimacy.

Despite violating the UN treaty that prohibits any state from actively seeking the destruction of another, Iran has paid no price for expressing such views. On the contrary, it continues to be courted by European nations which, in their attempt to appease Iran, are disturbingly indifferent to the threat posed to their national security by the Iranian subversion efforts across the continent.

Perhaps even more puzzling is the fact that while Tehran strengthens ties with Russia and China, the US persists in its efforts to reach a nuclear deal with Iran, never once entertaining the military option as a practical course of action.

Against this background, it appears that Khamenei is under no pressure to cease his anti-Israel activity. At the same time, he continues, at least formally, to distance Iran from the comprehensive terror campaign aimed at Jerusalem from various staging grounds. He is well aware of the dangers to Teheran’s nuclear program and to regime stability were Iran to enter full-scale warfare.

In this regard, the announced Iranian campaign to recruit volunteers for the

battlefield in Gaza is not genuine. Although Teheran boasts that the effort has reached 10 million people, among them 142 members of the Parliament, this is only a symbolic effort.

Israel ought to leverage this situation for its own advantage. Israel has space to hit the IRGC Qods Force in Iran and across the region without undue risk of escalation. Again, Iran will shy away from full-scale regional war.